

Quo Vadis English Language Learning System in Pesantren?

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Abstract

The integration of English language education into pesantren presents a growing pedagogical challenge in Indonesia, where traditional religious instruction often dominates curriculum design and classroom culture. Despite increasing awareness of English as a global communication tool, its implementation in pesantren remains fragmented and culturally misaligned. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding how pesantren leadership, educational substance, and institutional culture influence English instruction. Focusing on Darussalam Buntet *pesantren*—a semi-modern *pesantren* that integrates *kitab kuning* with formal education—this research uses a qualitative descriptive method grounded in Lawrence Friedman's legal system theory, encompassing structure, substance, and culture. Data were gathered through interviews and observations. Findings reveal that the structure of pesantren is fully governed by the *kiai*, who morally supports English instruction but has not issued binding policies to institutionalize it. Substantively, the pesantren shows openness to modern knowledge, yet English remains peripheral in its vision and curriculum. Culturally, the use of English in students' daily interactions is minimal, limited primarily to extracurricular programs such as English Day and English Club. In response, this study proposes a hybrid pedagogical model that combines Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with Content-Based Instruction (CBI), incorporating Islamic themes—such as *thaharah* and *prayer*—to make English both linguistically effective and religiously relevant. This approach aligns with pesantren values and students' cognitive frameworks, thereby enhancing motivation and legitimacy. The study recommends integrated curriculum reform, strengthened teacher capacity, and leader-driven policies that respect pesantren traditions while preparing students for global engagement through English proficiency.

Keywords: English Language Learning; Pesantren Education; Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Content-Based Instruction (CBI); Islamic Educational Reform

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools, or *pesantren*, are among the oldest and most influential Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia (Ningsih et al., 2023). Rooted deeply in the archipelago's religious and cultural landscape, pesantren have historically been the primary centers for religious instruction, producing generations of *kiai*, santri, and religious scholars who have played pivotal roles in shaping both religious life and broader societal norms. With the rapid transformation of global education and the increasing importance of English as a global lingua franca, many pesantren have gradually integrated English language learning into their curricula (Rahman et al., 2023; Supriyanto et al., 2025). This integration, however, presents a number of complex challenges.

While the inclusion of English reflects an awareness of its global significance—whether for higher education, international communication, or access to scholarly resources—it often clashes with the traditional pedagogical structures, goals, and resources of many pesantren (Achmadin et al., 2024; Mala et al., 2024). In many cases, English is treated not as a vital communication tool, but as a secondary or even marginal subject, sometimes taught through outdated methods or by underqualified instructors. The lack of language immersion environments, limited exposure to

authentic English usage, and pedagogical emphasis on rote memorization further inhibit learners' communicative competence.

Furthermore, the dual system of education—where religious sciences (such as tafsir, fiqh, and nahwu) are prioritized over general subjects including English—creates a tension between tradition and modernization. Many *santri* (students) internalize this prioritization and consider English a peripheral requirement rather than a central skill, resulting in a lack of motivation and engagement (Nashihin et al., 2024). Additionally, English is often perceived as a symbol of Western culture, which may pose cultural and ideological resistance in more traditional *pesantren* contexts.

The challenge is further compounded by infrastructural and human resource limitations. Many *pesantren*, particularly in rural areas, lack adequate facilities such as language laboratories, access to updated teaching materials, and trained teachers who are proficient in both English and appropriate pedagogical strategies (Sari, 2023; Umar, 2022). Even in *pesantren* that have adopted a more modern outlook, English instruction frequently lacks the contextualization necessary to make it relevant to the religious and social lives of the students. Consequently, despite policy reforms and curriculum diversification, English proficiency among *santri* remains generally low, limiting their competitiveness in national and global arenas.

Several studies have explored the challenges of English language education in Indonesia broadly, and a growing body of work has examined language learning in Islamic educational contexts. However, a critical gap remains in synthesizing these two domains to investigate the unique systemic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges facing English instruction specifically within the *pesantren* environment (Hidayati et al., 2024). Much of the existing literature focuses either on the macro-level language policy or on isolated case studies of individual institutions. These often overlook the broader systemic and structural factors that shape the learning environment within *pesantren*, such as the influence of traditional religious values on attitudes toward English, or the absence of integrated curriculum design that harmonizes English learning with religious studies. Moreover, limited attention has been given to exploring the interplay between students' sociocultural backgrounds, their religious identities, and their motivation—or lack thereof—for learning English.

While some recent initiatives, including government-backed curriculum reforms and community-based programs, have attempted to bridge the gap between religious and secular education, there is still a lack of empirical data on their effectiveness within the *pesantren* context. Furthermore, previous studies often employ quantitative methodologies that, while valuable, fail to capture the nuanced lived experiences of teachers and students within the *Pesantren* system. What is needed is a comprehensive, context-sensitive analysis that examines how English language learning is conceptualized, delivered, and received in the unique socio-religious ecosystem of the *pesantren*. Such research should investigate not only the obstacles but also the opportunities for reimagining English education in a way that respects Islamic pedagogical values while equipping students with the linguistic skills necessary for global engagement.

The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Islamic educational contexts can be analyzed through several theoretical lenses (Sidqurrahman, 2024). One of the most relevant frameworks is the Sociocultural Theory of Language Learning, which posits that language acquisition is not merely a cognitive process but one that is deeply embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts (Lantolf, 2011). Vygotsky's notion of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD) implies that students' language development can be optimized through scaffolding provided by more knowledgeable peers or teachers (Shabani et al., 2010). In the *pesantren* setting, this theory emphasizes the importance of peer collaboration and community learning.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is Language Ideology Theory, which investigates the beliefs and attitudes that speakers hold about languages (Schieffelin et al., 1998). Within the *pesantren* context, the ideological positioning of English as either a beneficial tool or a cultural threat influences how it is taught and learned. Understanding these ideological undercurrents is crucial for developing pedagogical strategies that do not alienate students from their religious identity but rather integrate English learning as a means of expanding religious knowledge and outreach, such as reading classical texts in English or engaging in *da'wah* internationally.

From a pedagogical standpoint, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has often been proposed as an effective approach to teaching English. However, CLT's emphasis on student-centered, interactive communication often conflicts with the teacher-centered and text-heavy approach traditionally found in *pesantren*. Thus, previous studies such as those by (Dahmardeh & Mahdikhani, 2025), and (Rosyada & Ramadhianti, 2021) point to the need for hybrid pedagogical models that blend communicative competence with culturally resonant teaching methods.

Empirical studies show varied results. A study by (Umniyah et al., 2025) found that English camps and extracurricular clubs within *pesantren* significantly improved students' speaking skills, particularly when native-like exposure was provided. Another study by (Nurhayati & Fibriani, 2024) highlighted the effectiveness of integrating Islamic content into English teaching materials to boost motivation and contextual relevance. Conversely, other researchers, such as (Hasanah et al., 2023), argue that without structural reform—particularly in teacher training and curriculum alignment—such interventions remain limited in scope and impact. Taken together, these theoretical and empirical studies suggest the importance of a holistic approach to English language instruction in *pesantren*, one that is pedagogically sound, culturally sensitive, and structurally sustainable.

The aim of this study is to explore a good learning system in terms of the structure of the *pesantren*, the substance of the *pesantren* and the culture of the *pesantren* at the Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* which has semi-modern characteristics.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Lawrence Friedman's legal system theory as the analytical framework. Friedman's model, originally used in legal studies, divides a legal system into three interrelated components: structure, substance, culture. In this study, this model is adapted to analyze the English language learning system within *pesantren*, positioning *pesantren* as a socio-educational system in which formal and informal norms interact dynamically. This model provides a holistic lens to understand how leadership, values, and daily practices collectively shape the process and outcomes of English language education in *pesantren*.

Research Design and Approach

The research uses a qualitative descriptive methodology to capture in-depth, contextual insights into the functioning of English language learning in selected *pesantren*. The method focuses on observation as the primary data-gathering technique, aiming to identify patterns and meanings embedded in the daily life, routines, and structures of the *pesantren*. Observations were conducted in natural settings without manipulating variables, allowing the researcher to explore English language education as it authentically occurs within the educational ecosystem of the *pesantren*.

Data Source and Setting

The study was conducted in one *pesantren* located in the Darussalam Buntet *pesantren*. The selection was purposive, based on the *pesantren's* willingness to incorporate English into their educational agenda, while still maintaining a strong traditional Islamic ethos. This variation ensures that the findings can reflect broader patterns and issues across the *pesantren* education system.

Observation Framework Based on Friedman's Legal System

The structure of the observation is categorized into three core components derived from Friedman's framework: structure, substance, culture. Each is broken down into specific sub-indicators relevant to the *pesantren* context.

Number	Indicators	Sub-Indicators	Goal Achievement
1	Structure of <i>Pesantren</i>	Kiai Leadership	Knowing the role and influence of <i>kiai</i> in determining the direction of <i>pesantren</i> policy and culture
		Rules and Regulations	Understanding the discipline management

		of <i>Pesantren</i>	system and internal rules that affect the learning and <i>santri</i> 's life
2	Substance of <i>Pesantren</i>	Vision and Mission of <i>Pesantren</i>	Exploring the main objectives and direction of <i>pesantren</i> education in forming the character and <i>santri</i> 's knowledge
		Perceptions of English Language Learning	Knowing the views of <i>pesantren</i> on the importance of English in the context of Islamic education
3	Culture of <i>Pesantren</i>	Daily communication of <i>santri</i>	Observing patterns of social interaction and everyday language use among <i>santri</i>
		<i>Santri</i> 's response to English	Knowing the attitudes of <i>santri</i> towards learning English in <i>pesantren</i> environments
		The rhythm of the <i>santri</i> 's ' daily activities	Analyzing the daily routines of <i>santri</i> that form character and learning consistency
4	Structure and Substance (combined) of <i>Pesantren</i>	<i>Kiai</i> 's Policy on Formal Schools	Analyzing the integration between traditional and modern education in Darussalam Buntet <i>Pesantren</i> .
5	Culture (continued) of <i>Pesantren</i>	English Programs or English Activities	Identifying forms of English language support activities outside formal classes in <i>Pesantren</i> .

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where observation notes were organized according to the three core domains (structure, substance, culture) and their sub-indicators. Recurring patterns, contradictions, and anomalies were identified across the *pesantren*. The analysis aimed to produce a grounded understanding of how various elements interact to shape English education in these contexts.

Research Goal

The aim of this study is to explore a good learning system in terms of the structure of the *pesantren*, the substance of the *pesantren* and the culture of the *pesantren* at the Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* which has semi-modern characteristics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Finding 1

Structure of Pesantren

Observations show that Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* is a semi-modern *pesantren* that implements both the yellow text and formal schooling. Its students range from elementary school to college. Most students are classified as middle-class. This boarding school does not charge high fees like modern *pesantren*, but it also does not charge low fees like classical *pesantren*. The *Kiai* of this *pesantren* has a background in classical *pesantren* education but allow the development of formal education, including English language learning.

What are the views and roles of Kiai in supporting English learning in Pesantren?

The *Kiai* of the Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren*, despite coming from a *traditional (classical)* *Pesantren* background, demonstrates willingness to modern educational developments, including English language learning. He views English as a vital tool in facing the challenges of the times,

especially for students continuing their education to a higher level or entering the workforce. The *kiai* provides space for formal institutions under the *pesantren*'s auspices to manage and develop an English curriculum tailored to students' needs. This support is both moral and strategic, although it does not involve direct intervention in the technical teaching process.

Quotes from Interviews:

"I do come from a traditional (classical) pesantren background, but I don't reject formal education. English is important in this day and age. It's not meant to undermine our faith, but to open our students' access to the outside world. As long as it doesn't interfere with the study of the scriptures and etiquette at the pesantren, I allow English lessons. The school handles the technical aspects; I simply provide guidance." (Kiai of Darussalam Buntet Pesantren)

Are there any specific rules that support or hinder the use of English in Pesantren?

Institutionally, Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* does not yet have specific regulations explicitly requiring the use of English outside of class or in the daily lives of its students. There is no English area system, as is the case in modern *pesantren*. However, there are no prohibitions or restrictions on the use of English. Teachers at the formal institution have the authority to organize additional activities such as English Club, English Day, or English speech competitions, which are morally supported by the *Pesantren*.

The *Pesantren*'s disciplinary system continues to prioritize general discipline related to manners, worship, and mastery of the yellow books. English language learning is not prioritized institutionally, but it is not hindered. In fact, in some activities, such as inter-*madrasah* competitions or commemorating Language Day, the *pesantren* supports the use of foreign languages, including English, in limited but positive ways.

Quotes from Interviews:

"There's no English area here like in modern Pesantren. But if there are English competitions or presentations, we don't forbid them; in fact, we support them. There's an unwritten rule that English must be used. But there's no prohibition either. English language activities depend on the school's initiative and the students' enthusiasm. We emphasize manners, congregational prayer, and Quran recitation. But if a student enjoys English, we consider that a plus." (Pesantren Management).

As the spiritual and structural leader of *Pesantren*, *kiai* plays a crucial role in creating a positive atmosphere for English learning, even without direct technical instruction. The rules and regulations at Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* are flexible and open to innovation, including the use of English. There are no specific policies that require or restrict students, but rather allow formal institutions to develop methods and programs tailored to the needs of each level of education.

Finding 2

Substance of Pesantren

Observations show that Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* is a semi-modern *pesantren* that implements both the yellow text and formal schooling. Its students range from elementary school to college. Most students are classified as middle-class. This boarding school does not charge high fees like modern *pesantren*, but it also does not charge low fees like classical *pesantren*. The *Kiai* of this *pesantren* has a background in classical *pesantren* education but allow the development of formal education, including English language learning.

Does the vision and mission of the Pesantren reflect the importance of mastering English in an Islamic and global context?

The vision and mission of the Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* emphasize the development of students with noble morals, a deep understanding of religious knowledge, and skills in science and technology. While English is not explicitly mentioned, the spirit of integration between Islamic values and formal education reflects an openness to mastering foreign languages as a preparation for facing global challenges. The *Pesantren* recognizes that students will not only become local leaders but also need to be able to interact in national and international contexts. Therefore, although

English is not a primary component of the written vision, in its implementation, the boarding school encourages formal schools under its auspices to develop English language skills appropriate to their educational level.

Quotes from Interviews:

"Our vision is indeed focused on religious and moral education, but we are also open to modern science. English is included in this, especially for high school and college students. English isn't yet part of the pesantren's vision, but we know it's important. So we encourage schools under the pesantren to strengthen it." (The Kiai's first son at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren).

What is the general perception of students, teachers, and Management towards learning English?

In general, perceptions of English language learning at the Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* tend to be accepted by the *santri*, although they vary depending on background and educational level. *Ustadz* (Islamic teachers) in formal schools and some students at the junior high school level and above understand that English proficiency is essential for continuing their studies and accessing global literature. Some students even show active interest by participating in extracurricular programs such as the English Club.

However, some students from traditional backgrounds still view English as a difficult subject and not directly relevant to their study of the holy book. Despite this, there was no ideological resistance or rejection from religious teachers or *pesantren* administrators. Instead, they appreciated efforts to improve English skills as long as they did not interfere with their primary studies, such as evening Quranic study groups or holy book circles.

Quotes from Interviews:

Students now realize that if they want to continue their studies or participate in scholarship selection, English is essential. So they're more open." (One of Ustadz at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren).

"Some are still afraid because they think it's difficult, but no one refuses. In fact, many participate in English speech competitions." (The Pesantren Management).

"The Ustadz and the administrators never forbid it. The important thing is that the time doesn't clash with evening Quran study." (One of Santri – Grade 12).

The vision and mission of Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* support the development of global competencies, including English, although this is not explicitly stated. Perceptions of English tend to be neutral among various groups within *pesantren*, including students, *Ustadz*, and Management, as long as it does not interfere with the foundations of religious education.

Finding 3

Culture of Pesantren

Observations show that Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* is a semi-modern *pesantren* that implements both the yellow text and formal schooling. Its students range from elementary school to college. Most students are classified as middle-class. This boarding school does not charge high fees like modern *pesantren*, but it also does not charge low fees like classical *pesantren*. The *Kiai* of this *pesantren* has a background in classical *pesantren* education but allow the development of formal education, including English language learning.

What language do students predominantly use in their daily lives? Is there room for informal use of English?

In their daily lives, students at the Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* use Indonesian as the primary language for interactions between students and with teachers. In certain contexts, particularly during the study of yellow books, students also use classical Arabic, particularly religious terms. Regional languages (Cirebon/Sundanese) are also occasionally used in casual conversations among local students. Informal use of English remains very limited. Some students actively participating in extracurricular activities or competitions occasionally use English terms or greetings spontaneously, but this is not done consistently or widely. There is no specific area where the use of English is

mandatory (such as an English zone), but there is no prohibition from the boarding school either, so it generally relies on the initiative of individual students and teachers.

Quotes from Interviews:

"We use Indonesian in our daily lives, sometimes Cirebon. We use Arabic for religious texts. English? Most suitable for lessons or competition practice. There's no English area yet, but we encourage the kids to use English during certain activities. It just hasn't become a habit yet." (One of Santri – Grade 11).

What is the attitude of students towards English-based lessons or programs?

Students' attitudes toward English lessons are generally quite positive, especially among high school and university students, who recognize the importance of mastering a foreign language for furthering their studies or competing outside of Islamic boarding schools. They demonstrate enthusiasm in activities such as speech competitions, debates, and English Camps. However, at the *madrasah diniyah* level or for elementary school students, English learning tends to be passive. Some find it difficult due to limited vocabulary and less communicative teaching methods. Despite this, there is no ideological rejection of English among students. The majority view it as an important school subject, although not all students are strongly motivated to actively practice it outside of class.

Quotes from Interviews:

"I participated in an English speech contest during my boarding school's anniversary. I was scared at first, but I gradually became enthusiastic. The teachers were also supportive." (One of santri – Grade 12)

"Younger students are sometimes reluctant to learn English because they say it's difficult. But they enjoy it when we invite them to play while they learn." (One of Ustadz at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren)

"The students here are open to English lessons. No one says it's forbidden or against them. But it does require a fun approach." (The Pesantren Management)

Does the students' daily schedule provide enough space for English practice or learning?

The daily activities of students at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren are quite busy. Mornings and afternoons are filled with formal school activities (MI, MTs, MA, STIT Buntet and UIN Cirebon), while afternoons and evenings are filled with religious studies, memorization, and worship. Free time is limited, but there are still some slots available for additional activities such as English extracurricular activities, especially on weekends or in the evenings before evening recitation. However, because religious activities remain a priority, the frequency and duration of active English use outside of school is still relatively minimal. Nevertheless, some Ustadz try to optimize the available time by holding light but effective activities, such as English Games or Speaking Practice every Saturday afternoon.

Quotes from Interviews:

"The schedule is indeed busy, but we still include English activities, usually on Saturdays or before sunset." (One of Ustadz at Darussalam Buntet Pesantren)

"In the morning, I have campus, afternoon Al-quran study, and evening religious gatherings. So, there really isn't much time for English practice, unless there's a special program." (Santri-STIT Buntet Pesantren–Semester 4).

"Time is limited, but we try to maintain weekly English sessions. This way, they'll still be exposed, even if it's not as intense." (The Pesantren Management)

The students' everyday language is dominated by Indonesian, Arabic scripts, and regional languages, with English being used only in certain contexts. The students' attitudes toward English are quite open and positive, although their motivation varies depending on their age and educational

level. The students' daily routine is quite busy, but there is limited space for additional and creative English-based activities.

Finding 4

Structure and Substance of Pesantren

Observations show that Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* is a semi-modern *pesantren* that implements both the yellow text and formal schooling. Its students range from elementary school to college. Most students are classified as middle-class. This boarding school does not charge high fees like modern *pesantren*, but it also does not charge low fees like classical *pesantren*. The *Kiai* of this *pesantren* has a background in classical *pesantren* education but allow the development of formal education, including English language learning.

What is the Kiai's policy in balancing the study of yellow books and formal lessons such as English?

The *Kiai* of the Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* has a policy that emphasizes a balance between traditional and formal education, including English language lessons. Although he comes from a classical *Pesantren* background, he does not reject modern developments. He allows formal institutions under the *Pesantren*'s auspices ample space to develop curricula and learning activities that align with current needs—as long as they do not interfere with core Islamic boarding school activities such as religious studies and congregational worship.

The policy implemented is not rigid or closed-off. The *Kiai* prioritizes religious studies as the core of the *Pesantren*, but fully supports formal education as an important complement for students, preparing them to face the outside world, both academically, socially, and professionally. In the context of English, the *Kiai* entrusts Ustadz and the management to design appropriate teaching methods, including extracurricular programs and competency enrichment.

Quotes from Interviews:

"The yellow books are our foundation. But I also know that students need other knowledge, including English. That's why we have schools, from Islamic elementary schools to STIT Buntet *Pesantren* or STIKES Buntet *Pesantren*. It's part of our effort to prepare students for the times. I don't interfere directly with schoolwork, but I instruct them not to disturb each other. Even though evening Quran study is ongoing, school is also optimal." (The *Kiai* of Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren*).

"The *kiai* gave us the freedom to set the curriculum. English is one of the things we continue to develop because the needs of students today are different from those of the past." (The *Pesantren* Management)

The *Kiai*'s policies of Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* are very moderate and accommodating to the development of formal education. The study of yellow books remains the primary identity of *Pesantren*, but subjects such as English are given space and encouragement to develop through formal channels. This flexibility in formal education management reflects leadership policies that are adaptive, realistic, and responsive to the needs of the times.

Finding 5

Culture of Pesantren (Continued)

Observations show that Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* is a semi-modern *pesantren* that implements both the yellow text and formal schooling. Its students range from elementary school to college. Most students are classified as middle-class. This boarding school does not charge high fees like modern *pesantren*, but it also does not charge low fees like classical *pesantren*. The *Kiai* of this *pesantren* has a background in classical *pesantren* education but allow the development of formal education, including English language learning.

Are there additional activities such as English Club, English Day, or English-language competitions? And how is student participation?

Darussalam Buntet *Pesantren* offers several additional English language activities conducted through formal institutions under the *Pesantren*'s auspices, such as madrasahs and colleges. These activities include English Club, English Day, and English speech competitions held to

commemorate major holidays or annual boarding school events. These activities are not held simultaneously at all levels, but are more active at the middle and upper levels (junior high school/Islamic junior high school and above, up to university).

Student participation in these activities is quite good, especially among those who already have an interest or confidence in speaking. Some students remain passive due to limited ability or shyness. However, these activities are generally supported by *Ustadz* and *Pesantren* management and are considered an important means of honing communication skills and building students' confidence in using a foreign language.

Quotes from Interviews:

"Our school has an English Club that's active every Saturday afternoon. Students can practice speaking, debating, and sometimes even perform English dramas." (Ustadz, Darussalam Buntet Pesantren)

"I participate in English Day, usually every two weeks. But sometimes my friends are shy or don't quite know how to. But it's fun, so I learn slowly." (One of Santri – Grade 11).

"We don't require all students to participate in English activities, but we fully support creative teachers who create such programs." (Darussalam Buntet Pesantren Daily Management)

English language activities such as English Clubs and speech competitions do exist, especially at the middle and high school levels. Student participation is voluntary and varied, but generally demonstrates enthusiasm, especially for those who already have an interest. The *Pesantren* supports these activities morally and institutionally, although they have not yet become a mandatory program for the entire *Pesantren*.

Discussion

The findings from Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* illustrate a unique educational ecology where traditional Islamic scholarship and formal education coexist. This hybrid identity significantly influences the way English language education is perceived, structured, and practiced. While the *pesantren* remains grounded in the study of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*), there is growing awareness among its leadership and stakeholders of the importance of English for broader intellectual and professional engagement.

Interpretation Practices and Intellectual Culture

Santri at Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* routinely use Javanese-Arabic Pegon to interpret classical Arabic texts. This practice reflects not only their commitment to traditional Islamic scholarship but also their sophisticated transliteration abilities and intellectual agility. Pegon is more than a transliteration system—it is a cultural-linguistic bridge between local identity and global religious knowledge. However, it also reinforces a language ecosystem where Arabic and Indonesian dominate, creating limited space for the practical use of English.

In such a setting, the linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) developed through Pegon and kitab learning does not naturally support communicative English, which is highly contextual and interactive in nature. English, in contrast, is often seen as an academic or external subject, not an embedded language of daily religious or social practice.

Religious Curriculum and Cognitive Relevance

The content focus of santri discussions—such as *thaharah* (purification), *sholat* (prayer), *zakat*, *shaum* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage)—highlights a curriculum that is deeply spiritual and ritual-based. These themes, while central to Islamic piety, are usually taught using Arabic religious terminology and are not often translated into communicative English contexts.

This curricular orientation poses a challenge: how can English be made relevant to the dominant epistemological framework of *pesantren*? Integrating Islamic content into English lessons—as suggested by (Nurhayati & Fibriani, 2024) — offers one viable solution. English learning in

pesantren must not simply be functional (i.e., for exams or travel), but must resonate with the students' religious worldview, thereby legitimizing it within the *pesantren*'s moral economy.

Structural, Substantial, and Cultural Factors Shaping English Learning

The limitations and possibilities of English learning at Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* can be analyzed through the lens of Lawrence Friedman's legal system framework—structure, substance, and culture—which, when adapted pedagogically, offers a comprehensive understanding.

1. Structure: The *pesantren*'s leadership, particularly the *kiai*, plays a pivotal role. The *kiai* demonstrates an approving yet not directive stance toward English education. While he does not mandate specific language programs, he empowers formal institutions (e.g., schools under the *pesantren*) to develop context-sensitive English curricula. However, there is no institutional policy mandating English zones, which are commonly found in modern *pesantren* like Gontor. The lack of structural enforcement mechanisms limits consistency and depth in English use.
2. Substance: The vision and mission of the *pesantren* support moral and intellectual excellence, yet English is not explicitly mentioned. Its inclusion is incidental and driven by the formal school units rather than by *pesantren* doctrine. This creates a dual system where English remains a “school” subject, not a “*pesantren*” subject. Consequently, its prestige among students—especially younger or more conservative ones—remains lower.
3. Culture: Daily life in the *pesantren* is conducted primarily in Indonesian, Arabic (for religious contexts), and local languages like Cirebonese or *bebasan*. English is used in isolated, extracurricular contexts (e.g., English Club, English Day). It has not permeated the students' cultural-linguistic routines, thus failing to establish a language ecology favorable to spontaneous or habitual English use. The limited cultural capital of English in this context curtails its broader uptake (Norton, 2013).

A Hybrid and Contextualized Approach: Towards an Ideal System

Given these findings, the most effective and culturally coherent model for English language education at Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* is a hybrid pedagogical approach. This model would blend Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)—emphasizing fluency and real-world communication (Richards & Rodgers, 2001)—with content-based instruction (CBI) rooted in Islamic themes. A CLT-CBI hybrid would allow English to be taught through familiar content (e.g., *thaharah* (purification), *sholat* (prayer), *zakat*, *shaum* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage)), thereby embedding language learning within the students' existing religious schema. For example, a lesson on descriptive text could use the topic of *thaharah* as outlined in Safinatun Najah, allowing students to describe purification practices while simultaneously reinforcing both language objectives and foundational Islamic values.

Furthermore, the “weak form” of CLT (Littlewood, 1981) may be more appropriate in this setting. Rather than requiring high levels of spontaneous interaction (as in native-like settings), the weak CLT model emphasizes structured practice, guided interaction, and language confidence-building—all of which are suited to the *pesantren*'s hierarchical and teacher-respecting culture. Programs such as English Day, speech, and peer speaking groups on Saturdays are steps in the right direction. These initiatives offer authentic yet manageable exposure to English. As (Wibowo, 2015) found, even low-frequency immersive environments like camps or club sessions can significantly enhance speaking skills when delivered consistently.

However, institutional backing is essential. *Pesantren* leadership should consider formalizing English exposure policies—not necessarily enforcing English zones, but creating English corridors, assigning language ambassadors, or even hosting “Bilingual Friday Sermons” for senior students.

CONCLUSION

The investigation into the English language learning system at Darussalam Buntet *pesantren* reveals a complex interplay between tradition and modernity, shaped by the *pesantren*'s structural leadership, educational substance, and cultural practices. While the institution's semi-modern character—evident in its dual commitment to yellow book (*kitab kuning*) and formal schooling—creates a foundation for English instruction, the absence of formal policy and structural

reinforcement hinders systemic implementation. The *pesantren*'s use of Javanese-Arabic Pegon and its theological curriculum rooted in ritual practices, such as *thaharah* (purification), *sholat* (prayer), *zakat*, *shaum* (fasting), and *hajj* (pilgrimage)) reflect a deeply embedded epistemological framework that is not naturally aligned with the principles of communicative English.

Despite this, there exists a cultural openness and leadership support—albeit non-directive—toward English language development. When viewed through Friedman's framework of structure, substance, and culture, it becomes clear that meaningful reform requires more than extracurricular initiatives. A hybrid pedagogical approach, combining Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) with Content-Based Instruction (CBI) rooted in Islamic themes, presents the most culturally coherent and pedagogically effective model. Such a model not only respects the moral economy of *pesantren* but also expands santri's language repertoire in ways that support global engagement.

Ultimately, the success of English education in *pesantren* depends on its ability to be legitimized both religiously and institutionally. This requires deliberate alignment between language pedagogy, *pesantren* values, and student identity—transforming English from a peripheral academic subject into a meaningful tool of expression, *da'wah*, and intellectual participation.

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